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ABSTRACT

Geography is a key to understanding and acting effectively in our world. It is the subject that, more than any other, enables people to comprehend the earth and its environment, and to appreciate the delicate balances between the human and physical elements that bind people to this planet. However, more than half the children of the United States are failing to achieve geographic literacy. Several reports for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal alarming deficiencies in the geography learning of U.S. youth. Furthermore, a recent international survey by the Gallup Organization found that U.S. young people lag far behind their age-mates in other industrially developed countries in their map skills and knowledge of geography. This ERIC Digest discusses: (1) what students should learn about geography; (2) what to do at school to improve the geography learning of students; and (3) what to do at home to improve the geography learning of children. A list of references and ERIC resources is provided. (DB)

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TEACHING GEOGRAPHY AT SCHOOL AND HOME

BY

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Teaching Geography at School and Home

by Joseph P. Stoltman

Geography is a key to understanding and acting effectively in our world. It is the subject that, more than any other, enables people to comprehend the earth and its environment, and to appreciate the delicate balances between the human and physical elements that bind people to this planet. However, more than half of our children are failing to achieve geographic literacy. Several reports from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reveal alarming deficiencies in the geography learning of American youth. Furthermore, a recent international survey by the Gallup Organization found that young Americans lag far behind their age-mates in other industrially developed countries in their map skills and knowledge of geography. This Digest discusses (1) what students should learn about geography, (2) what to do at school to improve the geography learning of students, and (3) what to do at home to improve the geography learning of children.

What Should Everyone Learn about Geography? Knowing the locations of places and peoples is a first step in achieving geographic literacy. A second level of literacy pertains to the physical (natural) and human characteristics of the diverse places of our world. An even higher and more complex comprehension and competence involves the dynamic relationships of peoples and places, which explain continuities and changes in their characteristics. The geographically literate person, for example, understands why communities are located where they are, how people have shaped them into distinctive places, and how they have, in turn, affected peoples' lives. Geographic literacy also involves the use of knowledge to solve problems and make decisions in our daily lives.

Geography should be taught as a very practical subject. It adds to one's knowledge, understanding, and appreciation of the world around us. It makes survival possible by providing us with the knowledge we need to locate suitable places to grow food and to organize natural resources to provide clothing and shelter. It deals with how people use the land, how air pollution at one location affects another location a great distance away, and how cultural groups develop and maintain distinctive ways of life.

The Joint Committee on Geographic Education developed five fundamental themes to help students learn geography. These five themes have been endorsed by the Association of American Geographers, the National Council for Geographic Education, and the National Geographic Society; and they have been widely adopted in schools to teach geographic literacy. Each theme is listed and described below in conjunction with a question to focus the thinking of teachers and learners.

- Location: People and places are positioned variously on the Earth's surface. Where in the world are places located?
- Place: Physical and human characteristics distinguish one place from other places. What makes a place special?
- Relationships Within Places: The interactions of humans with their environments shape the characteristics of both people and the environment. How do people change the natural environment and how does the environment influence the activities of people?
- Movement: Human interactions on the Earth—people, products, and information—affect the characteristics of places. What are the global patterns of movement of people, products, and information?
- Regions: The Earth can be divided into regions to help us understand similarities and differences of peoples and places. How do regions form and change?

The five fundamental themes of geography provide big ideas that the learner can use to organize and interpret the data of the discipline. There are few topics studied in geography at grades K-12 that do not fit comfortably within one of the fundamental themes. Just as importantly, seldom do any of the five themes stand alone in the study of geography. One theme usually has a major role in the study of an issue, but the other four themes play important supporting roles. For example, in studying the relationships between people and the environment among the Lakotas of the North American Great Plains, the theme of movement is critical to explanation of the nomadic way of life these people followed in their reliance upon the buffalo.

What Can Be Done at School? Increase the coverage of geography in every grade or level of the school curriculum. Students cannot achieve geographic literacy unless they have ample exposure to this subject.

Teach geography as a separate subject in secondary schools. In addition, infuse the five geographic themes into other school subjects, such as U.S. history, world history, economics, earth science, and anthropology.

Emphasize the five themes of geography to provide continuity, structure, and depth to studies of this subject. Avoid superficial surveys of discrete information, in which many facts are mentioned and few ideas are investigated in depth. Use case studies to examine the ways that the five fundamental themes explain how communities and countries function.

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Use multiple sources and media of instruction, such as video programs, primary documents, computer software, wall maps and charts, globes and atlases, and periodicals with numerous pictures and maps. Avoid complete reliance on standard textbooks.

Emphasize active learning, the application of knowledge to solutions of realistic problems. De-emphasize passive reception of information.

Use the community outside the school as a rich source of examples and data in the study of the five geographic themes. Involve students in "hands-on" investigations of nearby places.

What Can Be Done At Home? Parents and guardians can enhance geography learning of their children by advocating an emphasis on this subject in the school curriculum. They can also reinforce school learning by doing the following things at home:

- Monitor homework assignments to make certain they are completed satisfactorily.
- View national and international news at least twice a week with children and use a map to locate and discuss the places in the news.
- Encourage family viewing of television programs with geographic content and participate with children in post-program discussions of geographic themes and issues.
- Provide geographic learning resources in the home—books, magazines, and maps—and read and discuss them with children.
- Seek opportunities to examine and discuss geographic themes with children as they are encountered in daily activities in the home and neighborhood.
- Observe maps being used in different ways—in newspapers, magazines, and textbooks—and hold conversations about the ways that ideas from the fundamental themes of geography are used on maps (for example, to show movement or to show natural characteristics of places).
- Encourage children to practice drawing free-hand sketch maps of the home, the neighborhood, the school, the state, and the world, and talk about the maps and what they show. Compare them to maps in atlases and talk about how the maps in our minds help us use geography to get from one place to another or understand what is happening in distant places.
- Take children to the upper stories of houses and other buildings to look out the windows. Have them describe what they see and discuss with them how the "birdseye view" differs from the view at ground level, and how the view is similar to a map.
- Encourage children to be keen observers of the natural and human environments, and to ask questions about the things they observe.

The preceding recommendations are firmly rooted in studies that show how parents or guardians can positively influence academic achievement of their children. Furthermore, better performances on the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests of geography learning were associated with these factors: higher educational attainment of parents, a home environment where reading and information are valued, a stable family environment, limited recreational use of television, and substantial involvement of children in regular homework assignments.

As the child's first teachers, parents and guardians can make an enormous difference in a student's achievement of geographic literacy by directing attention to the importance of this subject. In addition, activities at home have an ongoing influence upon one's learning of geography by reinforcing ideas discussed in school and enhancing their applications to the real world.

References and ERIC Resources

The following list of resources includes references used to prepare this Digest. The items followed by an ED number are in the ERIC system. They are available in microfiche and paper copies from the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS). For information about prices, contact EDRS, 7420 Fullerton Road, Suite 110, Springfield, Virginia 22153-2852; telephone numbers are 703-440-1400 and 800-443-3742. Entries followed by an EJ number are annotated monthly in CURRENT INDEX TO JOURNALS IN EDUCATION (CIJE), which is available in most larger public and university libraries. EJ documents are not available through EDRS. However, they can be located in the journal section of many libraries by using the bibliographic information provided below, or ordered through Interlibrary Loan.

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